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ABSTRACT

An inventory consisting of 25 Likert-type statements assessed the perceptions of 62 urban and 66 rural Minnesota elementary teachers concerning educational practices that enhance or prohibit success in their schools. Urban teachers were more positive than rural teachers about factors contributing to success in their respective schools, differing significantly on 13 of 25 statements. Successful school practices identified by urban teachers included: (1) time and money for staff development; (2) grade level meetings; (3) support for professional development; (4) use of alternative delivery systems in the classroom; (5) site based management; and (6) an array of parent communication techniques. Rural teachers often commented that they valued being left alone to run their classrooms as they chose. Practices identified by urban teachers as lessening school success appeared to focus on curriculum and time. Most negative school practices identified by rural teachers centered on budgets and consolidation. Other negative rural school practices were related to lack of appropriate communication with parents. Further analysis of written comments indicates that unsuccessful practices identified by urban teachers could be changed with time management improvements, while rural teachers portrayed a feeling of hopelessness. Contains several tables of survey results and 23 references. (KS)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS: PERCEPTION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Paper present at the Fourteenth Annual Rural & Small Schools Conference

October 26-27, 1992, Manhattan, Kansas

by

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Introduction

Public concern over the quality of schools has led to numerous studies on those conditions needed in order for a school to be effective. The premise being that if a school has these conditions integrated into their daily operation they will encounter continuous success. The school site is being recognized as the major agent in implementation of those processes needed to establish effective practices.

There are many variations of the number and type of variables needed by schools in order to be successful. Variables that can be found in individual school districts throughout the nation. Unfortunately there is no single formula that all schools can use to establish and maintain success because schools are not identical. Schools are made up of cultures, which vary from school to school, can include geographical configurations, socioeconomic status, and school organizational patterns (Lanier and Little, 1986).

Good (1989) suggests that effective school research should not be used as a simple prescription to be applied to all schools. A theory further supported by Stedman (1987) who states that adopting a formula for effective schools is not sufficient to produce effectiveness. Factors for

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school success should be viewed as prerequisites and each school needs to figure out for itself how it can be more effective.

It would appear that when schools are similar in terms of physical facilities, resources, size and type of faculty, and size of student body there are a number of factors that differentiate schools in how successful they are. The literature does not suggest that the needs of rural schools are different from urban schools (Kleine and Wood, 1989). It does, however, suggest that the cultures surrounding urban and rural schools are unique (Ferman-Nemser and Floden, 1984). For example, Grant (1989) reported that many urban teachers experience culture shock and spend months learning how to handle this culture shock and how to teach urban children effectively. While Boyer (1992) stated that teachers in rural schools face similar situations with regard to culture shock but the numbers may not be as large. Poverty, child abuse, divorce, and cultural differences are not unique to urban school districts. And, the availability of school personnel or social service agencies within the school community are critical to how teachers can adjust to the cultures of their respective schools (Boyer, 1992).

Teachers are viewed as one of the most important agents in the implementation of successful school practices (Lipshy, 1980). Yet, the characteristics of the pupils, families, administrative styles, curriculum constraints, and community affect the teacher's work (Dreeben, 1973) . Unless administrators, school board members, and the community understand this impact; teachers may be unable to implement teaching practices that are part of successful school formulas (Deal, 1985) . Administrative and community attitudes toward student achievement, teacher satisfaction, parental approval, and support for school practice are several factors that make up the culture of the school.

Knowing the attitudes, beliefs and values of teachers and; modifying factors needed for effective schools around this information should increase implementation of such practices that lead to successful schools. According to Kennedy (1990) teachers will implement new practices if the change is viewed as being worthwhile and if it can be connected to prior experiences. Such experiences can range from administrative support for staff development, more palatable working conditions, time to implement new strategies, and school administrators promoting change to the community at large (Charters, Jr., 1963).

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether conditions for school success differs between rural and urban elementary school teachers. In addition to determining how teachers in each setting ranked their school's success, an attempt was made to ascertain practices that promoted or inhibited successful school practices.

Method

The elementary teachers used in this study consisted on 62 teachers from urban school districts and 66 teachers from rural school districts located in Minnesota. All the teachers were enrolled in a Master's program in elementary education at a Big Ten institution. The average number of years taught by the subjects in this study was 9.6 years with a range of 34 to 2 years. A breakdown of the grade level taught at the time of the study was as follows: 11 kindergarten teachers (6 rural and 5 urban), 61 primary teachers (25 rural and 36 urban), intermediate teachers (18 rural and 16 urban), and 'other' (13 rural and 9 urban). 'Other' consisted of special education or substitute teachers.

Teachers completed an inventory consisting of twenty-five Likert-type statements to which respondents indicated on a 5-point scale the truth of

the statement. In addition, teachers were asked to describe current practices that either enhanced or prohibited success in their schools.

A two-tailed *t* test was computed for each factor to compare rural and urban teachers' responses. Each factor and its result was placed in one of five categories: teacher collegiality, teacher professional support, administrative support, student support, and parent-school communication. Teachers priorities improving school success and obstacles to school success were tallied.

Results and Discussion

Tables 1 through 5 show similarities and differences among the questions in the survey that may reflect the school culture in which teachers operate. When interpreting these data, it is important to remember that differences in schools limit the conclusiveness of any study examining the school cultures (Feiman-Nemser and Floden, 1986). It should be noted, however, that when the results were analyzed the responses from rural teachers were less positive than that of urban teachers for all twenty-five questions. And, statistically significant difference (i.e. <.001,< .01, <.05 & <.10) occurred in thirteen of the twenty-five questions.

Table 1 reveals how the subjects responded to those questions that reflect their role with that of their colleagues in the school. Question 2 indicates that there were major differences ($p < .05$) in how teachers in rural schools articulated curriculum goals across grade levels compared to their urban counterparts. Research has established that successful

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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schools strive for clearly defined goals for school organization and effective teaching (Creemers & Reynolds, 1989; Grady, M.L., Wayson & Zirel, 1989; Rosenholtz, 1985).

Written comments from urban teachers related to Question 2 revealed that they often had grade level meetings as well as meetings across grade levels (e.g., primary grade teacher meetings) within their building and district wide during the school year. Urban teachers that such meetings were held during teacher workshop days, before and after school and, are scheduled throughout the school year. Rural teachers responded that grade level meetings were held but usually took place during teacher workshop time at the beginning of the school year. And, often times a rural teacher revealed that she was the only teacher teaching at a particular grade level in the building and, in several cases, in the district.

While Questions 3, 4, 5, and 6 did not produce major differences, written responses revealed that both urban and rural teachers perceived that their respective schools were average or above average in promoting a supportive teaching climate. Teachers in both settings indicated that the interaction with colleagues was of a positive nature but more of personal than professional nature. For urban teachers, risk-taking was often encouraged by administrators and support staff as a way to effectively meet the needs of the variety of student learning styles that were present in their classrooms. However, rural teachers were often discouraged from risk-taking if the building principal felt that the project might cause discipline problems, have the potential for parent complaints, or cost additional monies for training or purchasing of materials.

Support teachers received as professionals are reflected in Table 2. Questions 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 19. The results reveal that significant differences were found in Question 9 ($p<.05$), Question 12 ($p<.10$), Question

13 (p.<.05), Question 14 (p<.10), Question 16 (p<.05), and Question 19 (p<.05). Collaboration efforts between teachers and administrators is

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Insert Table 2 about here.

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needed in order for schools to operate effectively (Rosenholtz, 1985). Such practices lessens teacher isolation through peer observation and coaching (Rosenholtz, 1989; Good, 1989); acknowledges teachers' ideas (Johnson, 1990); results in successful school management (Melvin, 1991); and encourages experimentation (Corcoran and Wilson, 1986; Firestone, Rosenblum, & Webb, 1987).

Positive comments from urban teachers showed that their respective districts not only provided staff development opportunities within the school district but encouraged teachers to participate in graduate programs. And, that participating in graduate coursework was reward by upward movement on salary schedule. In addition, several urban teachers stated that their districts regularly cited outstanding teachers in the district newsletter or in community newspapers. Conversely, rural teachers revealed that they were not encouraged to participate in professional growth experiences that would result in a salary increase. Rural teachers often identified the financial condition of their particular district as reason for their district not providing staff development or encouraging teachers to complete coursework leading to increases in salary. Many rural teachers stated that they often attended workshops on weekends during the school year because the substitute teacher's pay would be deducted form their check. Also, several rural teachers cited that their building principal often was responsible for two to three schools. This meant that the average time the principal spent in their

school was once a week. As a result, there was little time to discuss issues other than those related to building maintenance such as parent complaints, supplies, or problem students. In addition, rural teachers commented that they were seldom observed. One teacher, with twenty-three years of teaching experience, stated that she was never observed by any of her principals.

Teachers' perceptions of administrative or district support can be seen in Table 3. There were no major differences in the results between urban and rural teachers. However, written comments by teachers in both

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Insert Table 3 about here.

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groups appeared to contradict comments made in response to questions in Table 2. Both urban and rural teachers commented that they were seldom, if ever, observed by the building principal.

A review comments related to Table 3 questions seems to indicate that the teachers appreciated the fact that their building principals 'left them alone' to teach in their classrooms. Rural teachers did state that their district were very responsive to those areas that involved scheduling, supplies, utilities, and behavior problems not related to academics. Urban teachers, however, added that there were curriculum coordinators or grade level leaders with whom they met on a regular basis to address issues related to questions 1, 7, 8, 10, and 11.

Written comments by rural teachers for this section were disturbing. Many rural teachers stated that district mergers along with re-assignment of building principals left teachers in a state of uncertainty. Several teachers indicated that if they had completed this survey last year, their school would rank outstanding in every area due to

the support they received from the building principal. This year, however, they perceived their district to be a the bottom because the building principal, who was assigned to their building as a result of a district merger, told the teachers that he had two years until retirement and that the teachers should leave him alone. Another set of teachers wrote how their building principal told the teachers in their building that he became a principal because he did not like children. Comments of a like nature were written by other rural teachers for this section. In almost every situation the teachers had just experienced or were going through a consolidation process.

Results of teacher perceptions of what is expected from students can be found in Table 4. Significant differences were found in Questions 18 ($p<.10$), 20 ($p<.10$), 21 ($p<.10$), and 22 ($p<.05$). Analysis of written comments for these five questions appear to indicate that urban teachers feel that their respective schools are above average in setting and communicating student expectations.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Reviewing urban teachers' written comments shows that urban schools regularly schedule events that foster positive student relationships. Events identified included regular morning meetings were behavior and academic goals are discussed, individual conferences, regular written communication with parents, student advisory councils, and support from administration. Practices that reflect a healthy school climate (Corcoran and Wilson, 1986; Yelton, Miller, & Ruscoe, 1989). The urban teachers who commented on this section wrote that their districts had a student code of conduct which outlined the districts' academic and behavior

policies for students. Most rural teachers indicated that they were not aware if their districts had a student code of conduct.

While written responses from rural teachers were mostly positive, they differed in content. Rural teachers' comments revealed that classroom rules were posted in the room on the first day of school. And, that students had little input as to the construction of classroom rules. Similar comments were written about the other areas in this section. Students expectations were appear to come from the teachers and not discussed with students.

Table 5 illustrates how well urban and rural schools involve parents in the education of children. Question 24, means used to involved, revealed a significant difference ($p<.001$). Urban teachers identified that multiple means were used to communicate what children were doing in school and how parents could be of assistance. Areas identified included open house, grade level meetings for parents, regular parent newsletters, parent-teacher conferences scheduled two times a year, goal planning sessions with parents and their child, inviting parents to classrooms, and

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Insert Table 5 about here.

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active Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO). Conversely, parent-teacher conferences was the only form of parent involvement identified by rural teachers. And, parent-teacher conferences were held only in the fall and usually consisted of a 'cafeteria approach'. That is, teachers had tables set up in the school cafeteria and parents had to wait in line to talk to their child's teacher. Every ten minutes a bell would ring marking the end of the conference time.

Unlike their urban counterparts, rural teachers seldom identified the

use of parent newsletters, open houses, PTOs, or inviting parents into the classroom. Practices that have been identified as the most often used by teachers to interact with parents (Purnell & Gotts, 1985).

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if the perceptions of successful school practices differed between urban and rural teachers. An inventory consisting of twenty-five Likert-type statements was administered to sixty-two urban and sixty-six rural elementary teachers. Teachers were asked to describe current practices that either enhanced or prohibited success in their schools. Analysis of the data revealed that urban teachers were more positive than rural teachers about factors contributing to success in their respective schools. Furthermore, in thirteen of the twenty-five statements a statistically significant difference was found.

Successful school practices identified by urban teachers included time and money for staff development, grade level meetings, support for professional development, use of alternative delivery systems in the classroom, site based management, and an array of parent communication techniques.

Conversely, identification of successful practices by rural teachers needs to be interpreted in proper context. That is, rural teachers often commented that they valued being left alone to run their classrooms as they chose. The main reason being that support and guidance from the administration appeared to focus on maintaining a program that saved the district money or did not cause controversy.

Practices identified as lessening school success appeared to focus on curriculum and time. That is, urban teachers often commented that

not enough time was a factor in attending meetings, participating in staff development, communicating with students and parents, or keeping up with paper work. Too much curriculum and not enough time to teach all the curriculum was viewed as problematic.

Most negative school practices identified centered on budgets. Many rural teachers stated that their particular district was either in the process of consolidating, had been consolidated within the last two years, or was suffering from severe budget cuts. All of which resulted in either limited or no monies available for curriculum purchases, supplies, or staff development. In the case of consolidation it meant changing grade levels or buildings from year to year, having a different building principal each year, and being confronted by disgruntled parents who were not in favor of consolidation. Many rural teachers revealed that they were often the ones who were put in positions to explain consolidation to the community instead of district personnel.

Other negative rural school practices appeared to focus on lack of appropriate communication with parents. For example, the rural districts that used the ten minute cafeteria approach for parent-teacher conferences revealed that every attempt by the district to pass a referendum in the past eight years was defeated. Positive parental involvement is a must if schools are to succeed. Keeping parents at bay results not only in failed referendums but in the students' academic achievement (Rich, 1985).

Further analysis of written comments seems to indicate that unsuccessful practices identified by urban teachers are internal to the school. That is, urban teachers implied through their responses that they had control over these practices and that once the time management issue was addressed many of these practices would improve. Many rural

teachers, however, portrayed a feeling of hopelessness. The implication being that they could not control those factors negatively impacting their teaching because these factors were external to the classroom or building. School consolidation, transfer of teachers or administrators, and limited budgets were viewed as variables beyond the power of rural teachers. And, that these variables impacted how they functioned in their respective classrooms and buildings.

The data from this investigation suggest that rural teachers face special disadvantages. Rural teachers appear to be affected more by the financial conditions of their districts then are urban teachers. As a result, rural teachers identified conditions outside of their control as negatively impacting how they function in the classroom, school, and community. It is true that each school must figure out for itself how it can become more effective. Teachers, however, can not implement successful school formulas without support from administrators and the community.

It appears from this investigation that the district's financial condition and the building principal's support of successful school practices greatly impacts teachers. Further studies need to be conducted to determine the extent of this impact.

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Table 1
TEACHER COLLEGIALITY
Factor Means From School Inventory

Question	Urban	Rural	*t* value
2. THERE IS CLARITY ABOUT THE CURRICULUM GOALS IN THIS SCHOOL AMONG TEACHERS. THERE IS GOOD ARTICULATION FROM ONE TEACHER TO ANOTHER WITHIN SUBJECTS AND ACROSS GRADES. TEACHER AUTONOMY IS RESPECTED, ESPECIALLY IN INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUE, BUT THERE IS DEFINITE CONTINUITY IN THE CURRICULUM FROM ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER.	2.46	2.81	-2.07***
3. THERE ARE DEFINITE PRIORITIES ESTABLISHED WITH THE FULL INVOLVEMENT OF THE FACULTY. THE CURRICULUM IS REASONABLE. YOU ARE NOT ASKED TO DO MORE THAN A SCHOOL CAN REASONABLY DO.	2.85	2.87	- .16
4. TEACHERS ARE GENERALLY POSITIVE AND OPTIMISTIC. THEY HAVE A SENSE OF EFFICACY; THAT IS THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIFFICULTIES AND THE CHALLENGE BUT BELIEVE THEY MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF YOUNGSTERS.	2.08	2.106	- .17
5. THERE IS A GENERAL CLIMATE OR MILIEU IN THE SCHOOL THAT SUPPORTS INDIVIDUAL TEACHER AND STUDENT DIFFERENCES. EXPLORATION, EXPERIMENTATION AND RISK-TAKING ARE ENCOURAGED AND IN MANY SMALL WAYS REWARDED.	2.61	2.62	- .06
6. THERE IS A SENSE OF "FAMILY" AMONG FACULTY MEMBERS. AN OBSERVER SEE VISIBLE INDICATIONS OF CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT GIVEN TO COLLEAGUES. STUDENTS WOULD SEE FACULTY SHARING WITH AND ENJOYING ONE ANOTHER.	2.06	2.12	- .36

***P<.05

Table 2
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT
Factor Means From School Inventory

Question	Urban	Rural	*t* value
9. NOT ONLY ARE MEANS OF TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY AND EVALUATION EXPLICIT BUT, RECIPROCALLY, ADMINISTRATIVE AND SUPERVISORY ACCOUNTABILITY TO ASSIST TEACHERS MEET OBJECTIVES IS ALSO CLEAR.	2.66	3.13	-2.92**
12. THERE IS A COHERENT AND CONTINUING SCHEME TO FACILITATE BOTH GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL TEACHER DEVELOPMENT.	2.70	3.01	-1.96****
13. TEACHERS ARE CENTRALLY INVOLVED IN ALL FACETS OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH.	2.45	2.96	-3.23**
14. ADEQUATE TIME IS PROVIDED AND EXPECTATIONS ARE REASONABLE RELATIVE TO CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL GROWTH.	2.69	3.07	-2.44***
16. TEACHERS RECEIVE REGULAR AND CONTINUING FORMS OF RECOGNITION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FOR A JOB WELL DONE. THE EFFORTS OF TEACHERS ARE PUBLICIZED IN VARIOUS WAYS.	3.08	3.57	-2.76**
19. QUALITY STANDARDS ARE UNIFORMLY UPHELD FOR TEACHERS.	2.46	2.92	-2.89**

**p<.01, ***P<.05, ****P<.10

Table 3
ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
Factor Means From School Inventory

Question	Urban	Rural	*t* value
1. THERE IS A SENSE OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND PRIDE IN THE SCHOOL. YOU COULD READILY SAY THIS SCHOOL IS KNOWN FOR X OR Y. THERE IS A DEFINITE SENSE OF CHARACTER ABOUT THE SCHOOL. ITS UNIQUE ASPECTS CAN BE READILY COMMUNICATED. THERE ARE SPECIAL THEMES OR EVENTS IN WHICH EVERYONE IS INVOLVED.	2.37	2.48	- .69
7. THE SCHOOL IS MANAGED AND ADMINISTERED EFFECTIVELY AND EFFICIENTLY. LINES OF DECISION-MAKING AND COMMUNICATION ARE CLEAR.	2.77	2.92	- .81
8. TEACHERS PERCEIVE THE ADMINISTRATION WILL SUPPORT THEM AND GO-TO-BAT FOR THEM IS DIFFERENT SITUATIONS. TEACHERS ARE TREATED WITH DIGNITY.	2.69	2.50	.98
10. TIME IS PROVIDED AND MEANS EXPLORED AT REGULAR INTERVALS TO CONFRONT CROSS-CUTTING PROBLEMS IN THE SCHOOL.	2.93	3.10	-1.11
11. CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IS EVIDENT AT THE SCHOOL SITE. NEW IDEAS, PRACTICES AND MATERIALS ARE DEMONSTRATED OR MODELED FOR TEACHERS.	2.70	2.95	-1.27

Table 4
STUDENT SUPPORT
Factor Means From School Inventory

Question	Urban	Rural	*t* value
15. EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS IN THE SCHOOL IS SYSTEMATICALLY COLLECTED AND WELL DISSEMINATED. THERE IS A CONSISTENCY BETWEEN BASIC PRIORITIES AND WHAT IS MEASURED IN TERMS OF STUDENT GROWTH. STANDARDIZED TEST DATA IS COMPLEMENTED WITH OTHER INDICES OF STUDENT AND TEACHER SUCCESS.	2.67	2.98	-2.29***
17. WHAT IS EXPECTED OF STUDENTS IS CLEAR AND UNDERSTANDABLE TO THEM IN TERMS OF BOTH ACHIEVEMENT AND BEHAVIOR.	2.14	2.33	-1.36
18. QUALITY STANDARDS ARE UNIFORMLY UPHELD FOR STUDENTS.	2.37	2.61	-1.66****
20. NONPRODUCTIVE AND INAPPROPRIATE STUDENT BEHAVIOR IS OUTLINED IN EXPLICIT POLICY AND CONSISTENTLY UPHELD IN PRACTICE. AT THE SAME TIME THE DIGNITY OF THE STUDENT IS RESPECTED.	2.32	2.61	-1.78****
21. STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND OWNERSHIP IN THE SCHOOL IS FOSTERED WHENEVER POSSIBLE.	2.45	2.69	-1.71****
22. STUDENTS REGULARLY GET ACCURATE FEEDBACK ABOUT THEIR PROGRESS AND RECOGNITION FOR IT.	2.17	2.40	-2.03***
25. STUDENTS ARE NUMBER ONE. TIME CAN ALWAYS BE FOUND TO ATTEND TO THE PRESSING NEEDS OF AN INDIVIDUAL.	2.25	2.35	- .65

***p<.05, ****P<.10

Table 5
PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION
Factor Means From School Inventory

Question	Urban	Rural	*t* value
23. SPECIFIC LINKS ARE MADE BETWEEN THE STUDENTS LIFE IN SCHOOL AND HIS OR HER LIFE IN THE HOME. HOMEWORK IS USED TO MAKE THESE LINKAGES.	2.70	2.90	-1.45
24. MULTIPLE MEANS ARE EMPLOYED TO INVOLVE PARENTS AND COMMUNITY IN UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING THEIR SCHOOL'S PROGRAM.	2.16	2.69	-3.76*

*p<.001